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Chapter Sixteen: Angelique IX

April, 2031

"No, it's the other way around."

"Oh, so, first goes... first..."

"Yes, first you press the button, then you

turn the... yes, just like that. That unlocks the slide, and now-"

"It came out."

"Yes, it came out. Be careful with the spring."

"This one?"

"Yes, that one. Well, it's not like it could hurt you, but it has enough energy to free itself, and you might never recover it. It's small and easily-"

"It could fall into a drain or something."

"... yes, exactly."

"What do you recommend?"

"Use your right palm to hold the back of the frame, while using your thumb and index finger to release the spring. At the same time, you can use your left hand like a tent to prevent any mishap if it decides to fly out."

"Oh..."

"All right. You did it right. With the spring discharged of elastic energy, you can-"

"I have a question."

"... what is it?"

"Why..."

Angelique lifted her head and looked into my eyes. By now, I'm sure it's thanks to experience, but I can sense all the curiosity hidden behind those undisturbed blue orbes. The impending question didn't carry critical importance, and answering it wasn't absolutely necessary for our survival. Angelique was just asking because... she was curious, because she's a curious girl.

"Why are you teaching me to disassemble your gun before teaching me to disassemble mine?"

On the worktable in front of Angelique, who was wearing blue overalls we found in the house, my 92 lay partially disassembled. It was she who took care of removing part by part, while I just observed and corrected with... patience, I

want to believe.

It was the basement/armory, the one I once described to you before; I won't do it again.

"... it's not for anything too special."

"Then?"

"Mine is... just slightly more complicated to disassemble. Actually, barely more complicated, but I feel that if you learn with this one first, it will be much easier for you when you have to practice with yours."

"..."

"What do you think?"

"That you're teaching me things in reverse."

"Why?"

"Following that logic, shouldn't you first teach me to disassemble one of your rifles? If they are much more complex, then disassembling the pistol would be-"

"Angel."

She fell silent.

I knew... I know she doesn't do it on purpose, so I have to do my best to feel like she's not pulling my leg.

Like the good and only adult present, I breathe slowly and prepare a response in my head that fits the situation.

"The difference is that the pistol and the rifle are very, very different weapons. They may share certain essential elements, but the disassembly is not comparable at all. On the other hand, your pistol and mine have many similarities when it comes to maintenance, so it makes sense that you can deal with both by simply memorizing how one of them works."

She remained silent.

For a few seconds, she buried those eyes on me and made me want to hide behind the wall, but then she lowered her gaze to the desk and continued inspecting the parts of my Beretta.

"I understand..."

I'm thankful that she's so pragmatic.

"Write down everything I tell you and review it from time to time; I'll bombard you with questions until you remember every part by heart."

"Understood..."

"And if a part falls to the floor, you'll have to run two laps around the block."

"... huh?"

Angelique didn't look at me worried; rather, she looked at me puzzled. I could almost feel her pupils hinting that she believed I had gone crazy.

"... nothing, it's nothing."

Just memories, just that.

"Seriously, though, I really ask you to try

to remember this. Being able to maintain your own and my weapons would be a huge help, and it would take a big burden off me. I'm going to the kitchen, do you want anything?"

"Water."

"Okay. In the meantime, write down what I told you."

. . .

The water bottles we have on the many shelves in the kitchen are pre-boiled, ready to be consumed whenever we want. Of course, one would prefer to have cold water to drink, but the generator we have in the other basement operates on gas, and we can't afford to spend enough to keep the refrigerator on twenty-four hours. We use the generator only for lights or when we need to preserve meat for the next day. I grabbed a glass bottle to bring to Angelique and unwrapped for myself a roll of bread that Angelique and I attempted to make based on a book we read together.

Sure, we were missing half of the ingredients, and the taste isn't... the best, but at least it serves to deceive the stomach.

"..."

It's horrible.

I don't fully understand why, but Angelique likes it.

To Angelique...

Before going back to the basement, I stopped for a moment to look around.

The kitchen, and also the dining room, looked... welcoming. Little of what was there provided hospitality. Maybe the marks on the sofa, or maybe the books on the table, or maybe the cat sleeping on one of the chairs... no, none of that offers hospitality; those are just signs of life.

If I want to be objective, I can only say that our house exudes hostility from every opening. Every curve designed as cover, and every escape route planned according

to the situation. Everything hides intentions so sad, and yet... for us, it's a home. It's already a habit to sit on that sofa and waste time as night falls, taking turns petting the cat while he tries to escape. If it's difficult for me to imagine the lamentable moment when we have to flee, then for Angelique...

Maybe she doesn't care.

I don't know.

Despite the years, she remains very difficult to read. It's curious, but at this point, it's easier to ask her what she's thinking than to try to guess her intentions.

Angelique, you've grown a lot, but you haven't grown at all.

. . .

I felt strange looking down at my own feet with that bottle in my hands, like an old man yearning for a time that never existed. I chuckled to myself, and soon I headed back to the basement, but as I

descended...

Angelique was holding the 92 in her hands, fully assembled. She had managed to put it together on her own, and that was admirable, but it wasn't exactly what drew my attention at that moment, but rather... her gaze.

Her... those precious clear eyes wandered back and forth over the pistol, not with any kind of longing, but with a certain air of... of... ah, I can't find the word. It's not fear, it's... I don't know...

She looked at it the way one watches a distant fire.

She observed it in the way one sees a sinking ship.

She saw it in the way one watches trees fall in the distance.

So much so that she didn't even hear me coming. Absorbed, totally captivated by a trance that didn't let her escape from that fictional environment where only she and the weapon existed.

I took a step, but even so, she didn't

react, so I cleared my throat softly to try to free her from the clutches of whatever had decided to steal her away.

"Ah-".

She straightened her back, and quickly lifted her head to look at me. Seconds later, there was nothing left of that fearful Angelique from before; she had returned to being the same as always.

"I brought your water."

I said as I placed the bottle on the desk. She didn't thank me. She didn't even take a sip, she just... she lowered her gaze back to the pistol, and, to my surprise, she flashed a brief smile.

"Alez... I want to tell you something."

"What is it?"

"It has to do with this pistol."

"Huh... something you read, or..."

I approached slowly, without touching or disturbing her, until I was behind her and saw the 92 over her head.

"No, it's not something I read. It's something... something I dream. Something I dream often, and I believe..."

"Do you have recurring dreams, Angelique?"

A key to her memories.

"Only this one. This is the only dream I see over and over, and over again. Sometimes, even several times a night. So much so that I can't sleep. So much so... that I decide to go into your room in the early morning to lie down beside you. Somehow, that prevents the nightmare from returning."

"...".

"I'm really happy that you've never rejected me or sent me back. If you did, I

probably wouldn't be able to rest that night, so I wouldn't be fit for anything the next day, and you'd end up scolding me..."

"Angel..."

"Wait, I am not done."

I couldn't see her face, although I was dying to know what expression she was wearing. I could only see her back and her hair, tied in that lazy ponytail at the nape of her neck. She had her head slightly bowed, and... she continued, continued looking at that pistol without getting tired.

"Something is chasing me."

"How?"

"In the dream. In the dream, something is chasing me. Relentless. No matter how much I run, or how much I try to lose it. That... that shadow, that lightning bolt, runs after me as if I had done it some harm. But I know I haven't done anything to it. No, I haven't done anything to it. In fact, I don't even know it, and it was the one who..."

"Angel?"

"Who took something from me. That shadow stole something from me, took something I wanted, and then decided it wanted to have me too, so I run, run because my life depends on it. If I don't run, it will take me with it to a place I don't want to know. But it's... useless. At the end of the dream, I find myself locked in a room, so I turn around. I lean my back against the wall and hug myself with both arms while... while I see it approaching..."

Her voice didn't break, nor did her story cut off, but her shoulders... yes, her shoulders trembled. It was stress. Just

trying to remember that repeated dream caused her enormous distress, and even so, she decided to tell me everything.

But I...

I...

"I find myself locked, and, as if enjoying seeing me so helpless, it slows down. It still comes closer, but slower and slower. I can't see its face; it doesn't have a face. But, I feel... I feel its nonexistent eyes reading each of my movements. Clearly, I'm a prey, and it's a hunter. I have no choice but to die, and be devoured right there. Then, in the face of such a scenario, I... let go of my own embrace, and let myself fall. As I fall, I... wake up. I wake up in my bed, with heavy eyes and a racing chest."

"...".

"You see? At no point in that dream is anything related to any weapon mentioned, but even so, this pistol... your pistol is- ah-."

I didn't let her say another word, and quickly enveloped her with both of my arms. It was a tight hug. So tight that I made her lose her balance, and in response, I also allowed the weight to overcome my knees. We both fell to our knees, with me hugging her from behind. I rubbed my right cheek against the left side of her head just once, as if, perhaps, wanting to make sure that she really was there.

I didn't want to let her go. If it were up to me, I would be hugging her even now. I could feel the trembling leaving her limbs, and the nervousness she tried so hard to hide fading from her breath.

She's so warm.

She's so soft.

I have to take care of her, I have to protect her.

I have to shield her from everything, from everyone, and even from myself. I have to...

"Alez..."

"It's a dream, Angelique. It's a dream, like many others. I also have nightmares, and some of them repeat. They repeat a lot, and at night..."

"It's..."

Angelique said something. She let out a sentence that I couldn't quite understand, but she didn't bother to repeat it.

"Don't let it torture you, Angel. If you have bad dreams, just come to sleep with me. You know... you know well that I'll always have a place for you. It's... it's even more than that, if you even think that one night you might have that dream, it's enough to come sleep with me. Really, I don't mind at all. You can..."

"Alez."

"Yes?"

"Can I sleep with you tonight?"

"... yes, of course you can."

. . .

I have no intentions of hiding anything.

At this point in my life, and in my circumstances, I couldn't care less about what you might think about me, reader. I said it from the beginning: this is just another story. I don't want to leave you with a lesson, I don't want to justify my actions, I just... just need, in some way, to tell my truth, to recount my experiences, so that my journey and the people who accompanied me are not forgotten. This includes the good and also the bad.

You might feel that I'm going too slowly. I can't blame you; I don't know how a story is supposed to be told to make it comfortable for the reader. What I'm doing is... ah, I feel that, in the end, I am trying to justify myself a bit. Not with words, but with the stories these words compose.

I did many bad things. Many, many bad things.

Since I found myself separated from my

platoon and forced to survive on my own, my entire life has been based on causing as much harm as possible to avoid being the one harmed.

I stabbed people while they slept to steal their food because hunger no longer allowed me to think.

In the face of difficulty, more than once, I abandoned those around me to escape, and in the face of injustice, more than once, I looked the other way to avoid getting involved in the mud.

...

I like to think that my parents are still alive, rebuilding their lives somewhere in the Americas. I hope they are together. I suppose both of them think of me from time to time and lament that son who died in the war and will never return. I would like to send them a letter. Just one, and very short. Just two or three sentences. I would tell them that I am still fighting on my own, that I found a light in my life, and that they should no longer wait for me.

Hm...

I know of many others who also fled the continent. I heard that Julia, a girl who went to school with me, left the country and went to live in Southeast Asia as soon as the unrest began. She came from an affluent family, so I guess they had some information that others didn't. I hope she's okay; I liked that girl...

I no longer remember her face, her hairstyle, or her figure... but I liked that girl.

I wonder if that girl even remembers my name...

. . .

I don't want to keep anything from you, reader.

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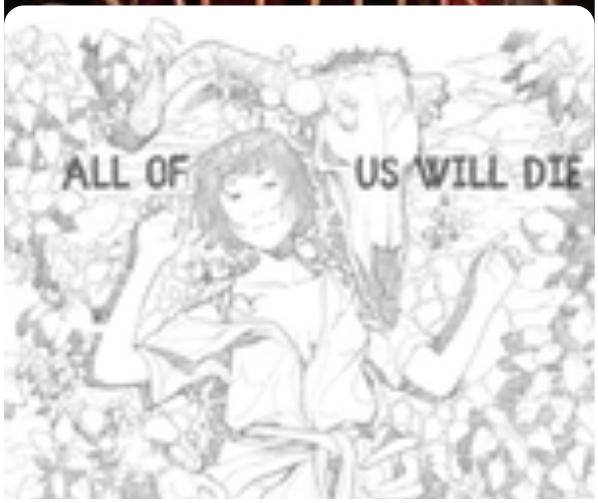

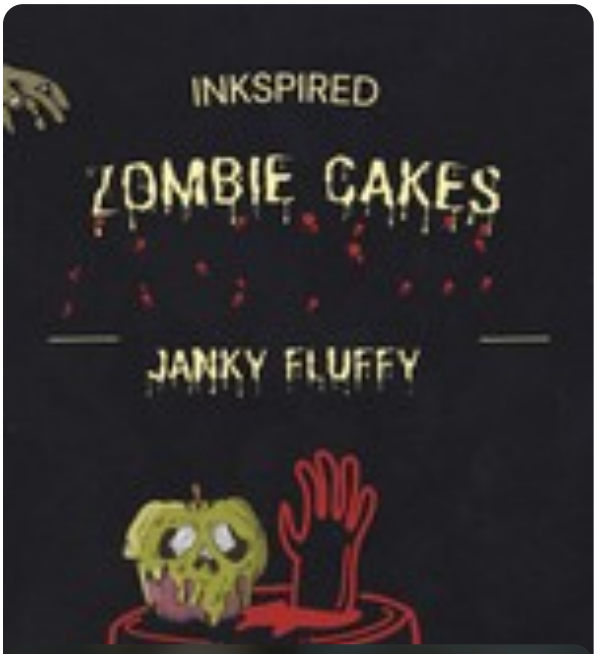

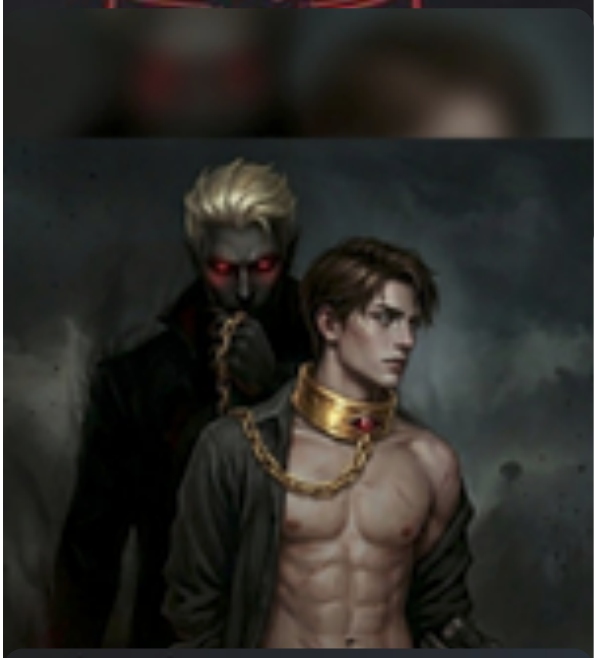

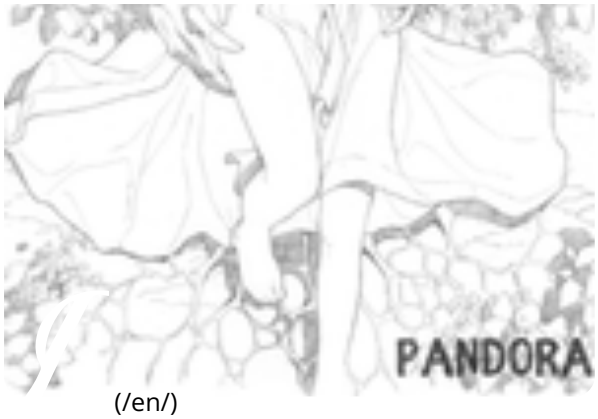

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